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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BASRAH 000050

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SUBJECT: IRAQI ARMY NOT PREPARED FOR PIC

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CLASSIFIED BY: Louis L. Bono, Director, Basrah Regional Embassy
Office, Department of State.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The commander of the Iraqi Army's (IA) 10th Infantry Division (ID), Major General Habib Abbas al-Husseini, told the Regional Embassy Office (REO) director on May 28 that his forces will not be able to secure Basrah once provincial Iraqi control (PIC) is handed over. His comments are reinforced by recent encounters between Ja'ish al-Mahdi (JAM) militia and IA soldiers. MG Habib is keen to occupy the Palace after the REO departs and says his troops are the only force that can secure it. End summary.

IA NOT PREPARED FOR PIC

¶2. (C) MG Habib, who commands IA forces in southeastern Iraq, said the 10th ID cannot provide security as Basrah moves toward Provincial Iraqi Control (PIC). He said the 10th ID is unable to contain the rising power of JAM, which has engaged in kidnappings and murders with growing impunity during the past two months. He said the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) are unable to disarm the JAM without a political consensus among the warring parties. Describing his 10th ID as "fledgling," the general said that he has only 2,000 soldiers under his command for the entire Basrah Province. In contrast, the Basrah police force has 17,000 men on its payroll, the majority of whom are militia gunmen. The general said that four additional battalions, including one new brigade, have been approved for the 10th Division and would increase its troop strength by over 6,000. He said without the additional troops, he would not be able to secure Basrah. Comment: In addition, if more 10th ID troops are reassigned, even temporarily, in support of the Baghdad Security Plan, it will further inhibit the 10th ID's capability. Should this be necessary, we should encourage the reassignment of Basrawi troops, rather than troops originating from other areas of Iraq. End comment.

JAM INTIMIDATES 10TH DIVISION

¶3. (C) Recent incidents between JAM and the 10th ID show that the militia is willing to take on the army with growing intrepidity. On May 23, JAM attacked a 10th ID patrol riding in armored Humvees. The gunmen destroyed two Humvees and captured weapons, radios, helmets and body armor, according to the IA. On May 25, following the killing of Basrah JAM leader Wissam al-Wa'eli (aka Abu Qadir) by Iraqi Special Operations Forces, JAM attacked the home of the 10th ID's chief of staff. A

spokesman hurriedly declared that the division had nothing to do with the killing in order to convince JAM to call off its attack. (See reftel A.) Also that evening, JAM attacked British troops garrisoned at the Provincial Joint Coordination Center. The British requested 10th ID reinforcements, but an Iraqi commander refused, saying his troops were not ready.

IS THE PALACE STILL AVAILABLE?

¶4. (C) MG Habib asked the director about the status of the Basrah Palace and said he would like to establish his headquarters and station troops there immediately. He said the Ministry of Transportation is looking to reclaim the Shatt al-Arab Hotel from the 10th ID for its Ports Directorate. (Note: The Shatt was recently vacated by British forces and turned over to the 10th ID. End note.) The director said it would not be possible to garrison Iraqi soldiers at the Palace until the REO departs late July. In any event the director said the GoI is interested in reclaiming the Palace for the Council of Ministers and stationing a presidential palace battalion to secure it. The director asked about plans to locate the 10th ID HQ at Camp Graham. MG Habib complained about construction delays at Camp Graham and expressed frustration with the contractor. He said the 10th ID needs the Palace, because it would allow the 10th to expand, and the IA is the only institution in the region with the integrity to keep JAM out. The director asked about the utility of stationing troops in Basrah city if they could not provide security. MG Habib said the Army could provide security in the vicinity of the Palace and provide further support to the Iraqi Police forces in the city.

COMMENT

¶5. (S) MG Habib's reluctance to handle security post-PIC is disappointing and contrasts his previous assertions that his forces would take on the IDF teams. (See ref. B.) His comments, coupled with JAM's intimidation of IA units, underscore the degree of influence that JAM wields in Basrah.

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Currently, Fadhila is the only force that countermands JAM, and if it loses the governor's office, JAM's position will strengthen. The 10th can still play an important role in securing Basrah, provided it receives the additional forces and they are recruited from outside Basrah. MG Habib may also require a little encouragement from the GoI.

¶6. (S) Despite the 10th ID's reluctance to take on JAM, we believe it is best positioned to occupy and secure the Palace in the immediate future. In less than two months, the REO will turn over its security responsibilities to the British Army, who in turn, seek to turn the Palace over to the Iraqis in early August. We should urge the GoI to station the 10th ID at the Palace, at least for the near term. This will enable us to hand over the Palace to an established, fairly reliable entity that is present in Basrah and would provide the "fledgling army" with much needed accommodation and furnishings. It would also allow the GoI time to raise and train a presidential palace battalion.

Otherwise, if the GoI insists on its own plan and continues to drag its feet, the British could find themselves at the Palace well beyond their end of summer deadline.

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